



University of Iowa

---

International Writing Program Archive of Residents' Work

---

Fall 10-1-2005

## Writing Sample

Said El Haji

Includes "The Days of Shaytaan" and "Present Day."

---

### Rights

Copyright © 2005 Said El Haji

### Recommended Citation

El Haji, Said, "Writing Sample" (2005). *International Writing Program Archive of Residents' Work*. 127.  
[https://ir.uiowa.edu/iwp\\_archive/127](https://ir.uiowa.edu/iwp_archive/127)

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#). For more information please contact: [lib-ir@uiowa.edu](mailto:lib-ir@uiowa.edu).

Said El Haji

## The Days of Shaytaan

*To Haji M'hammed El Haji, my father (1948-2000)*

We built it up together father, stone by stone, this towering wall of impotence. Now you are no longer here, you have passed on and this wall is left standing here simply for the sake of standing.

I am demolishing it, this silent, cowardly wall, slowly, stone by stone, because I despise it but fear the remorse, regret and guilt that may follow.

I don't know why I'm dedicating this book to you, father – after all, you can't read it. Even if you were still alive, you wouldn't have understood it, or you would have taken it the wrong way, so that the wall would have taken on even greater, irrevocable proportions.

I dedicate it to you nonetheless, because somewhere, somewhere deep down inside I have the feeling that it will do some good, for the future.

Rest in peace, father.

## Fall of the Angels

*Paradise was impoverished and lost, as if a terrible sickness, a pitiless, all-encompassing epidemic had taken hold. The lakes and rivers, once so azure blue that dancing shadows were visible on the bottom and the light that fell on them was reflected as if in a mirror, had turned into thick, centuries old milk puddings; the trees and bushes, once so rich in shades of green, so restful when the breeze tickled their branches and leaves, making you feel you really were in Paradise, stood there disconsolate; the air, once so clear that you could stare straight into infinity with the naked eye, not only that but so marvellously crisp and piquant that it gave you power and energy when you breathed it in – as if it were a kind of food – was now nothing more than a reddish-orange, brown and black haze.*

*Of the friendliness, amiability and warmth that in earlier times you could read in the eyes of all the angels, and which came back to you in moments of blissful, ethereal intoxication, nothing at all remained.*

*Once, music had been heard everywhere, honey-sweet music, and not only from the angels, playing on their zithers, harps, kettledrums and clarions. No, music once came from every direction, everything brought forth music: the air, the light, the earth, the mountains and the trees and the waters, apparently without any particular reason – music lay in the essence of everything.*

*But there was one reason, definitely: the sweet heavenly delight, the unprecedented euphoria felt by all things, surrounding everything like an atmosphere and permeating everything.*

*Now nothing could be heard except wailing and the gnashing of teeth. On every side the stink bubbled up and out through the innumerable pores, caves, splits and bumps of the surface, as if the ground were suffering from chronic flatulence. It stank of puke and rotten fish, of sweat and piss, of sour wine, diarrhoea and decomposing bodies. There was not a breath of wind, the air was suffocating, and that also explained why the creatures here – they couldn't really any be called angels any more – no longer, or barely, possessed olfactory organs – their noses had been stunted, overwhelmed by the vicious stench.*

*Shaytaan's corruption was reflected in all the soulless eyes, ineradicable, for eternity. The honey-sweet music had been driven away, and replaced by the gnashing of teeth, wailing and screams. The beings had lost their radiance. Nothing but cynicism, despondency, depravity and despair hung around them like a leaden blanket of fog. They were filled with envy and hatred, malice and deceitfulness, with resentment and the desire to destroy.*

*You ask if this was still Paradise, in that case? Hardly. The angels lived in a dismal society – although in fact their society didn't have anything to do with living, only death was lived through here. Everything was in a state of the most extreme affliction and rancour – everything.*

*It hit Father hard to see this. It made him melancholy. All he could do was to shake his head, as if he didn't want to believe that it was really true, that this was the implacable reality which lay at the heart of all things. The corruption did not attempt to conceal itself – it flaunted every facet of its repulsive nakedness. It was holy purity that had to keep out of site! Father clenched his fists and swallowed hard.*

*Hamid glanced across at Father. Father looked like a son of man, clad in a robe that reached to his ankles, and girdled at the chest with a golden sash; and His head and His hair were as white as white wool, as snow, and His eyes were like jets of flame; and His feet glowed like molten bronze, and His voice was like the voice of many waters. But Hamid was not at all impressed by Father's appearance. Hamid had never fallen at His feet as if dead, for he saw him almost every day, or even more often than that. Everything that set him apart, his lustre, had for Hamid – and not only for Hamid – as good as worn off; as happens with a traveller, a stranger, who has spent too long in one place and with the passage of time has come to be seen by the local people as an equal, made of flesh and blood, with strong and weak characteristics like everyone else, no more and no less.*

*Father in His turn looked at Hamid, His favourite, His promising pupil for the times to come – if they were to come. He had followed Hamid's development closely ever since his conception and what He saw had been good from the start, and had become better and better as time went on. He had been very patient with him and had seen to it that he was given the best of training and the best of teachers. The young angel had now begun to show signs of adulthood and Father was all the more pleased with Hamid's appearance as a result: lily-white wings like coconut, a healthy body, muscular to the point of perfection and rubbed with sweet-smelling oils to set off the muscles even better, a cherubic face with fresh, mint-green eyes and – most unusual for an angel – a head of orange-red hair, with curls like coiled springs hanging down over his forehead, ears and neck. Yes indeed, Hamid was a magnificent creature and Father saw that he was attractive and becoming more and more attractive as time went by; gradually it became clear to Father that He had not developed such a splendid and promising specimen of angel for a very long time, and He saw that He was good, that He had not lost the art of creation.*

*Father stared straight ahead. There was an indescribable expression on His face, a mixture of laughter and absolute seriousness. And suddenly He began to speak, in an emphatic tone, as if He longed for corroboration. "This," he said, "this I did not create."*

*"They all know that," Hamid tried to comfort Him.*

*Father knew what Hamid meant, but he didn't find it a very reassuring thought. He sighed, he did not wish to discuss it. What He saw here thoroughly disheartened Him, and as always when He saw something He didn't like, it made Him listless.*

*Side by side, shrouded in silence, they walked through this wilderness of sorrow. Father stared intently ahead. What was He doing here? Paradise was doomed and even He could not alter the fact, it was far too late for that – not that there had ever been time: after all, time did not exist in Paradise. But He forced Himself to look further – He had to see it with his own eyes.*

*Hamid by contrast was staring at the ground. For Hamid it was an incontrovertible fact that the misery Shaytaan caused was not something that ought to be abhorred. Because whose work was this really, then? Weren't Shaytaan and Father themselves no more than pawns? Ought they not to recognise that they were merely representatives of the ultimate antithesis? There had to be something higher, something beyond this superficial dualistic thinking, something for whom or for what all things were equal. After all, things were not black and white, everything was one great grey field, a widespread chaos – and that was neither good nor bad...*

*So they both walked on in silence. Until Father suddenly felt a sharp pain at the back of his head and cried out in alarm. They both turned round and saw an angry mob rushing towards them, armed with stones, sticks, axes, cudgels, whatever they had been able to lay their hands on. There was an icy look in their eyes and their laughter was mean and heartless. Clearly their intentions towards the god and his beautiful youth were anything but good.*

*In spite of the threat that emanated from them, Father addressed them with manifest self-possession. The pain in the back of his head aggravated him immensely and blood ran down his neck and streamed on under his robes. "What's all this, you ungrateful angels?"*

*The angry throng came to a halt and fell silent.*

*"What gives you the nerve to attack Me from behind like that?!" He went on. "I didn't expect you to welcome Me wholeheartedly, but treatment like this is beneath even My expectations of you...!"*

*A horrible jeering rose up from the crowd. "Who are you that we should treat you differently from anyone else?" they asked in chorus, and they proved by their unity, their brotherly fellow feeling, that they had not yet completely fallen into the hands of Shaytaan, were not yet entirely lost.*

*"I am your Father!"*

*Again the jeering rose. "That's pure arrogance! Even Shaytaan doesn't display such arrogance as that! We don't know you, you don't know us, and if you want that to change then for a start you'd better stay right there, oldie!" They started cursing again and throwing stones.*

*Hamid became afraid, he wanted to get away from here as quickly as possible. "Let's just go now, Father, this isn't looking good," he said. When he received no reply he tried again. "Shall I call the Guards instead, then?" The Guards were a new specimen of angel, called to life by Father to maintain the last remnants of order.*

*But Father didn't hear him. He was furious – his eyes were completely filled with rage. The foundations shook, the ground trembled, jolted, lurched and undulated as if it were a giant sheet of elastic, agitated by clumsy, insensitive fingers. Everything shook and wobbled, so that only a few of the crowd managed to stay upright, most of them fell over each other in droves. But by the sound of their laughter, which was rather like that of a herd of excited hyenas, they seemed to be getting an inordinate amount of enjoyment out of it. At the same time, there was a deep, threatening, rumbling sound, as if enormous pillars were giving way, and from all sides came trumpet blasts, as if a battle was commencing, and above it all kinds of drumming, droning, roaring and cracking noises. A biting wind rose up. Everything was shrouded in darkness. In the darkness the laughter of the angels could still be heard, but it stopped when an immense jet of blue flame slashed through the darkness, and an ear-splitting crack brought the hellish racket to an abrupt end.*

*A sudden, respectful silence fell, as if all the air had been sucked out through an invisible hole and there was nothing left to transmit sound – an unreal fall...*

*...*

*... in a smooth, gradual transition from absolute darkness to gentle light, the dawn of a new and glorious moment arrived. And behold, right between the multitude of angels and Father and Hamid a broad chasm, gaping from black depths, had appeared.*

*"Whoever has ears to hear, let him hear what I say!" Father spoke in a thundering, stentorian voice. "I know thy works, that thou art said to be alive, but thou art dead. You are living in My domain. I regret the fact that the heaven-tormenting Prince of Darkness has thrown you into this pit and I'm immensely sorry that I have shown My face so little. I understand that this has fuelled your distrust of Me. But I have my inadequacies too. Accept in any case my deepest sympathy..." And after a short pause, "I want hereby to build a new bridge between us." Having said this, he stopped speaking and a bridge built of massive steel girders appeared over the chasm. To set an example, Father walked onto the bridge first and stopped halfway.*

*A murmur of voices arose from the group on the other side. They looked at Father uncertainly, but still they didn't approach. Even though Father had roared like a lion, no feeling of fear came over them.*

*But what happened next was something no one could have anticipated, not even Father: one by one, they walked to the edge of the abyss and, accompanied by the most tranquil silence, plunged down into it, like stones.*

*His eyes wide with agitation and dismay, Hamid watched this weird and gruesome scene unfold. He didn't have the strength of mind to look at this terrifying enterprise in its macabre naked reality and take in its full meaning; he could only retreat into expressions of denial. "This isn't really happening...! This can't be allowed to happen...!" But it happened nonetheless and his tears flowed down without sobs.*

*Father could only watch passively as this extreme gesture of protest ran its course. No matter how complex and sophisticated his interpretation, it was impossible to see this as a favourable development.*

*Of the crowd of angels, only one was left, his head raised resolutely, like a seer. This angel was inordinately tall and had the appalling appearance of a walking corpse. His dark eyes looked serious, with a penetrating kind of reproach in them. He curled his hands to form a trumpet and shouted in a grating voice, "That thing comes here after I-don't-know-how-long to say that this is his domain, tells us to accept 'in any case' his 'deepest sympathy'... Ha! Why should we care about your sympathy! Where were you when, like a thunderclap from a clear blue sky, we were overwhelmed by Shaytaan's hurricane? Where were you when in that dark hour we needed you? We have seen Shaytaan's depths, the mad blackness of his overpowering soul and have been submerged by it like sheep without a shepherd. The black light shone in our hearts, while your dazzling light was hidden from us. And where were you for all the hours that followed? You did not appear, as if you were too good for us. You say you are sorry about what Shaytaan has done to us. But what use is that? Anyhow, aren't you even more guilty than he is, since Shaytaan didn't do anything that was not in his nature, whereas you neglected to do precisely those things you should never have failed to do? That's a fault of character we would never have dared to ascribe to you. After all, you were the Infallible One. Weren't you? In what have we been putting our faith all this time, in a charlatan, a second rate demiurge? What is there left for us to do but to make this gesture, born of despair...?" With a mysterious grin on his haggard face, the angel calmly walked to the edge of the abyss. "You tried to get closer to us by building this bridge. It could have been an excellent symbol of a new beginning. But alas, it's a complete irrelevance." And after a short pause, "Let this be our sign." And he threw himself into the depths. And for as long as it took for him to be engulfed by the invisible, as long as he was falling away from the surface at an incredible speed, he kept staring into Father's eyes.*

*Father felt every muscle in his body contract. He had forgotten the sharp pain in the back of his head and the blood was no longer flowing. He had wanted to intervene. He had wanted to close up the chasm as calmly as he had created it. He had wanted to fill the empty depths with water, with sand, with rose petals, with solid air if necessary. He had wanted to do whatever it took to turn back this terrible course of events. But He didn't. Even though He had it in His power to perform those kinds of tricks, even though He so much wanted to, He couldn't. Or, He could, but... He didn't do it.*

*Hamid looked distrustfully at Father. He was sick of falsehood and confronted Him directly, as He walked back down from the bridge, with the most urgent question – why had it gone so wrong?*

*Father folded his arms. Supporting His clean-shaven chin with His thumb, stroking His lips carefully with His index finger as if they were raw and sensitive from a winter cold, He looked Hamid determinedly and penetratingly in the eye. The disrespectful insistence with which the question had been thrown into his lap had certainly not escaped Him, but He didn't attempt to answer it. And it was not clear to Hamid whether Father had had enough of him now and was annoyed with him or... Should he go on asking questions or had he already asked too much?*

*Father's sparkling eyes now began to project a kind of worldly wisdom, as if he had developed something of a machiavellian attitude after such a long time in power – a sense that alerted Him, a sense that told Him that this was a question that should not be answered.*

*Hamid immediately detected a force he had never been aware of in Father before – reticence.*

*Father said, "Even a donkey doesn't bump into the same rock three times over, they say – even a deity has to learn from his mistakes."*

*Hamid understood at once what Father was referring to. Father was no longer a novice, having to prove himself to his subjects; Father was no longer inexperienced, letting his enthusiasm persuade him to take others too quickly into His confidence, unable to comprehend that wherever power resides, enemies often lie in wait too, ready to grab power away at the first opportunity, like a pack of wolves. Father had given up believing in a blissful Paradise a long time ago, he had learnt from His blunders with Shaytaan and Prometheus, and from His blunder with Adam and Eve and mankind. Truly, Father had gained insight, Father had become wise, experience had swept away his idealism.*

*But how sad it was that He didn't want to believe in the Universal Symbiosis! Did He really think that he, Hamid, a marvellous angelic specimen, knew nothing about the ultimate, the heights and the depths of the cosmic hierarchy? Was He really attempting to maintain His power in such a clumsy manner, a power that was in any case merely an illusion, since the real and only ultimate power lay in the Universal Symbiosis? Ah, what a sad case Father was! He had lost His hold over Paradise, the children of men didn't always choose to do what He regarded as good, not by a long way – and yet He still thought He was all-powerful. That wasn't wisdom, that was a kind of illness, that was an obsession!*

*Hamid couldn't help but regard Father's attitude as a response to his question. He tried a different tack. "Father, you know as well as I do that black is nothing without white, ignorance doesn't exist without wisdom and there's no good without evil. Isn't it true that we desire goodness as well as evil according to our needs, Father? Isn't it naive to think that good prevails over evil? Isn't that an all too superficial way of thinking? Father?"*

*Father swallowed and said, "I see that you have been somewhat influenced by the ideas of Gautama, and I wouldn't want to contradict you – certainly, evil exists within all good things and in all evil things, good exists. I don't like to use quotations, but in this case I feel forced to do so. Are you familiar with Kahlil Gibran, My young angel?"*

*"Yes I am, Father."*

*"He was a wise man, was Gibran. It pains Me that he doesn't want to become a teacher at the Academy, but if he prefers to stay in the House of Poets, along with the other greats, well then naturally I have to accept it. During his earthly life he wrote, 'For what is evil other than good that has been tormented by its own hunger and thirst? For indeed, if goodness is hungry, it looks for food even in the darkest caverns, and if it is thirsty, then it drinks even from the waters of death...'"*

*"...You take delight in laying down laws...," Hamid went on, "...but it gives you even more pleasure to break them. Like children playing on the beach, who earnestly build forts and then destroy them, laughing..."*

*"Ha ha ha!" laughed Father genially. "You've done your homework very thoroughly, dear boy, and I didn't expect anything less."*

*Hamid felt incensed – this was all far too serious to laugh about. "But why are you laughing, Father?" he asked. "Why are you laughing? It's no laughing matter."*

*Father went on laughing all the same, as if He were stuck that way.*

*So he really was pitiful, the supposed monarch. Hamid was heartily sick of it, of everything. The Paradise that had become a hell, the truth that had become a lie, the light that had become darkness, Father who had become devilish; it was all true – the Universal Symbiosis.*

*He walked away from Father, in the direction of the dark, gaping chasm. Something in the abyss drew him, or something in himself drew him towards it. Was it his own intense will that drove him, that urged him to take his fate into his own hands? Or was it the will of the Universal Symbiosis? Now he was certain: he would have to fall too. And he started to run. His feet pounded faster and faster – inwardly he was entirely calm. His steps were perfectly placed, unstoppable; they broke into a sprint. His thoughts were already on the other side.*

*Somewhere behind him he heard Father call out, in a muffled voice as if in a dream, "Hamid, what are you doing?! Ha-mid!!"*

*Hamid jumped.*

*He flew, he hovered – and fell.*

*Father's despairing voice sounded increasingly muffled. But as Hamid tumbled downwards, he didn't look up once. Elated, his spirit anticipated the most impossible, most unpredictable and improbable things that this great unknown could possibly have to offer.*

## Present Day

### One

The sun shines blinding white in a clear blue sky, only broken here and there by small, flimsy cirrus clouds. It's warm and the streets and buildings look dejected, wishing they had more space. The trees, without the slightest sigh or rustle... But the people shopping, strolling, lazing on terraces, the endless stream of cars with their shimmering metallic surfaces, lend the whole scene the animation that befits a big city. It's the height of summer and everywhere bronzed, sensual bodies are on show, recently returned from sunny holiday destinations.

Hamid is pleasantly surprised to see the imam again. If only to be able to tease him, as in the old days. He hasn't seen him for years. Perhaps a command from on high has decreed that he must meet him again: providence – or is it pure chance? He doesn't know. One thing he does know, however, is that even if Sidi Rabbi sent a whole army of imams to meet him, then he still wouldn't submit, not ever!

The imam says he recognises him from somewhere.

He lies and says his name is Ali.

The imam doesn't know anyone called Ali. Still – the ways of Allah are unfathomable – the imam enters into conversation with him.

It's after a short silence, a moment of suspended animation, shadowless and unreflecting, that Hamid looks into the dark, leathery face of the imam, swathed up to the cheekbones in a black-grey beard. The low, wrinkled forehead gleams, crossed by the shiny tracks of drops of sweat, like watery slugs, that disappear into the black-grey eyebrows. His eyes are barely visible, they lie deep under the low forehead; the hawk nose is angular, with comical nostrils above a mouth that looks as despondent as ever. And still on his head that white Mecca cap of his. No, apart from his greying beard he hasn't changed a bit, the imam.

They stand here, the imam (with bicycle!) and Hamid, on a large square with a real Moroccan fountain. The imam tells Hamid that after his departure from Berkerode he found a place to stay in the house of a great nephew of the brother-in-law of a friend of Suleiman's (who else?), who secured for him the recently vacated post of imam at a large mosque here in the city. Things are going very well for him now, the imam informs him. And since he has recently been issued with documents for unlimited Dutch residence, the imam is now busy arranging to bring his family to The Netherlands.

What the imam doesn't say, but Hamid knows perfectly well, is that only a few months ago, with the help of his new friends, he took legal proceedings against the Berkerode Muslims, his former employers – a case he won because the judge decided he had not received due payment for his services when he worked for them in that capacity. The imam is now aware of his rights in this country, and he is making full use of them...

The imam asks him, "Do you still pray to Allah?"

Hamid says he doesn't know who Allah is.

The imam is amazed, his eyes leap out of their sockets and his hand covers his gaping mouth. "What?! That's the purest heresy, man! You must indeed be a child of Shaytaan if you don't know who Allah is!"

"I don't know who Shaytaan is, either," Hamid says.

It's striking that the imam isn't surprised this time. The imam looks almost relieved and the look in his eyes suggests that he thinks Hamid isn't completely lost and depraved.

As if he cared.

He thinks about it for a few moments and says it's actually quite possible that he is a child of Shaytaan. Shortly before his birth, his father disappeared into the wide blue yonder – so he's never laid eyes on his father. "And I've never been shown any photos, because my mother felt so resentful she never wanted to show me any," he adds, to lend even more credibility to the foolish character he's dishing up. Then he sees fire in the eyes of the imam – it seems he's touched a

sensitive chord. The imam's face becomes horribly contorted, his little beady eyes look like those of a fish, with a fine network of blood-filled flashes of lightning running across them. The imam is about to explode and in order to prevent this outcome Hamid asks him in a friendly manner if he will tell him something about these two characters.

The imam explains that God is really called 'Allah', but that He also has a further ninety-nine names.

Hamid points out that that's very handy, because imagine if you forgot one of them, well, then you'd still have the other ninety-eight names to choose from.

The imam grins, thereby showing his crooked brown teeth as his chapped, broken lips part ever so slightly. "Al-lah..." the imam says, and he pronounces the name with a strong emphasis on the first 'a' as if he's squeezing something out of his stomach, and the second as if something has got stuck in his throat, waving his half-raised forefinger to and fro like a windscreen wiper, "... Al-lah is not to be made fun of, young man. Al-lah is all-powerful. Al-lah is so great that He is everywhere."

Hamid drops in the clever remark that he has picked up from *The Outsider* by Camus – that someone who is everywhere is really *nowhere*.

At this the imam rattles on in his indignant and bombastic voice that Allah is not an ordinary person, that He can't be comprehended by the ignorant spirit of man, that Allah is unfathomable—

"In what sense is he unfathomable then, exactly?" Hamid interrupts him.

"He makes everything happen with the Great Plan in mind. Nothing happens unless Allah wills it to happen, because Allah is the power of providence. We humans must simply submit to his requirements and never have the audacity to act against his will, as all the *koffar* do, from the most orthodox Jew to the staunchest atheist..." And finally, "We *Mussulmen* are Allah's own subjects."

"What kind of a character is he though, this Allah?" Hamid cries out in a voice suffused with melodrama, as if he's heard the name a great many times before but has finally reached the point of wanting clarification.

"Allah is the Creator of the Universe," the imam answers. "Everything you see and everything you cannot see is guided by His mighty hand."

*Aha!* Hamid understands now. If Allah exists – and he means *if* – then He's more of an artist than an architect, since he doesn't understand a bloody thing about planning or systematic construction. And if He did indeed create mankind and the world, then He's still in the process of doing it. He often sits there for hours enjoying His work, simply staring at it, slapping Himself on the back for the marvels He has created. Sometimes His rebellious self comes to the fore and He asks Himself what in God's name He's gone and started, holding his hand above his masterpiece, ready to sweep everything away with a single blow. Conclusion: creation is recreation. That's how great works of art come into existence, that's how the world comes into existence. Just as the process of creating a work of art is always more intriguing than the work itself, so the changeable world in all its intangibility is much more exciting than any picture of it. Perhaps that's the difference between art and Art: art takes a piece of the world, holds that piece captive, survives through time without really living, dead-still – Art by contrast doesn't take hold of a piece of the world, it is the world and everything beyond it, Art transcends time, independently of any kind of human effort.

He really ought to write this kind of nonsense down. Unfortunately, he doesn't have a pen on him. He goes back to listening to the imam, who is rambling on tirelessly.

"...Allah is always righteous and merciful. Even when the heathens begged Mohammed Rasool for forgiveness for the evil deeds they had done, they were allowed, after saying the *Shabada*, to enjoy his grace once more..."

"Is Mohammed one of those ninety-nine names?" Hamid asks. He is fully conscious by now of how faultlessly he is playing and embellishing his role, how artfully he is making use of



Socratic irony (and then again choosing not to use it) and the fun of it is killing him, because he can see that the imam regards him as a lost cause and he knows that his profession (that of the imam) forces him to guide his fellow man (which he certainly is) through the finer points of Islamic scholarship. And it's all the more fun since he's still pleasantly tipsy from all the sweet, white beers he's just been enjoying on a café terrace, while feasting his eyes on all the feminine beauty walking by.

"No-oo," the imam answers in a lazy, indignant tone of voice, sounding the 'oo' like a slowly passing car horn. "Mohammed is the messenger dispatched by Allah. He was sent to instruct us in the ways of Islam. He was sent to commit His Word to paper – the holy Koran."

Hamid nods sagely.

"But," the imam continues his oration, "Allah can also punish people without mercy for the sins they have committed in their earthly lives, and he does so by sending them to the eternal fires of hell. And on Quiyamat, the day on which all souls – not their rotting bodies – will arise from their graves, Allah will weigh the sins of each one on a scale and if their sins are heavier than their virtues, then they will fall at once into the kingdom of the Prince of Darkness, the empire of Shaytaan..."

It seems the imam wants to strike fear into him with his rousing performance and his sinister expression. The man appears to think Hamid really is ignorant and is therefore trying to give his words prophetic status by lending exaggerated weight to each one. "But then how can Allah find out whether someone has sinned or not? Most sins are committed in secret, aren't they?" Hamid resumes his questioning.

The imam bursts into loud and mocking laughter – and the world really does look very different when you're staring straight down someone's gullet.

Hamid starts to laugh too, at first as if uncertain, carefully, and then loudly and convincingly with a great deal of covert sarcasm.

Surprised, the imam looks at him, his head on one side, the laugh still half visible on his face. "What are you laughing at now!?" the imam cries out.

Hamid reckons the Imam should be happy that he can make others laugh, and immediately remarks that it's a gift to be able to produce laughter in other people – that's what his mother always said.

The half laugh disappears from the imam's face and he looks at Hamid, his eyes filled with pity. Those eyes betray his thoughts and in them Hamid sees that the imam really does believe he is ignorant.

The imam gently shakes his head, his eyes stuck in his face like drawing pins, his lips pressed tightly together. Not entirely without mockery, the imam remarks, "You really don't know much about Allah, eh?"

Hamid doesn't know whether he should answer this or not, and he nods out of feigned politeness.

"Don't you realise then that Allah sees everything, with His all-seeing eye looks down on everything, from the smallest atomic particle to the largest entity in existence? Even if you were to pick your nose in a safe made of steel a hundred metres thick, He would still be able to see you. Even if you think the most fleeting of thoughts... He knows their content."

Hamid now realises two things:

- 1) A safe made of steel a hundred metres thick is sheer hyperbole, since being able to see through steel a hundred metres thick isn't any more impressive than being able to see through steel ten centimetres thick.
- 2) Allah must by now feel like the most hated person who ever existed.

He goes on listening.

"...So whether you secretly lie, steal, fail to observe the month of fasting, drink *shirah* or eat *haram* meat, He sees it all and writes it down in your book. Because He keeps a book in which

everyone's deeds are recorded. Everything is recorded in the book, and the day of Quiyamat will be the day of reckoning, my lad."

"A kind of Father Christmas, then," Hamid jokes, rather feebly now (it's the alcohol).

At this the imam mumbles in Arabic that Allah must forgive him because he doesn't know any better. After all, he can't help the fact that his parents have been so neglectful of him, can he?

"Do *you* believe in Allah, then?" Hamid asks.

"Of course," says the imam.

"Do you *know* Allah?"

Obviously unaware of what Hamid is getting at, the imam declares with the certainty of one who believes he knows everything, "Yes, for Allah is in my heart."

"But believing isn't the same as knowing!" Hamid cries in triumph.

The imam gestures to him that he knows that well enough and asks what exactly he means.

Hamid explains that if you think you know Allah, then that implies the death of your faith. After all, it's no longer a matter of what you believe but rather of what you know – belief turns into knowledge.

The imam refuses to accept this, brushes the thought aside as the worthless sophistry of an unbeliever. "You may be good at philosophising," he says, with the greatest possible disdain, "but you don't have a clue when it comes to your religion. When I say that I believe in Allah and know Him, then I mean that I am convinced by my faith in Him." And again the imam appeals for forgiveness for Hamid, in murmured Arabic, on account of his boundless stupidity. Then he gives him a penetrating look – he seems to be asking himself something.

And Hamid asks himself in turn: *Can he see something in my eyes? Can he see or maybe smell that I've been drinking? Can he tell that I'm making fun of him? Does he recognise me...?*

"What do you actually believe in, if you don't believe in Allah?" asks the imam. "After all, you're no longer a child – how do you give meaning to your life?"

Hamid doesn't know whether the imam is on to him or not, but he's enjoying playing this role so much that he just can't stop. And now it comes to him... Pure inspiration. He only has to open his mouth and the words rattle out like a till receipt, metres long. "I believe in a cosmic law that is the basis of everything and from which everything else is derived—"

"But that *is* Allah, isn't it?"

"No, that is not Allah," he swiftly contradicts him. "I'm talking about a cosmic law, one which transcends all dualism. That isn't Allah, because Allah is part of that dualism. I'm talking about the Universal Symbiosis..." He feels that the roles have now been reversed; now the imam could easily start to ask him ridiculous questions in order to get his own back. But he doesn't give him the chance. Perhaps it's pure paranoia, but just in case he shuts his eyes, becoming one with his words, his revelation. And to keep it reasonably interesting for the imam and to ensure that he can follow it all, he throws in a question from time to time, which he answers himself. "...What is the Universal Symbiosis, then? How can we understand it, grasp it? Well, the Universal Symbiosis is inherently impossible to grasp, because it can't be defined in relation to anything else; it stands entirely alone, undefined and unlimited. It's not the totality of things, as there is always a more all-embracing totality. It's not that more all-embracing totality either, as there is always are yet more all-embracing totality, and so on and so on, ad infinitum..." The imam tries to interrupt, but Hamid remains stubbornly deaf to everything and keeps his eyes shut. Demonstratively, he puts his right hand to his right ear, the way muezzins tend to do when they make the call to prayer. "...So is there really no possible way – however obscure and esoteric it may be – in which to understand the Universal Symbiosis?" he thunders on like an oracle, like a train whose brakes have been put out of action. "No. All attempts to grasp the Universal Symbiosis by means of whatever category you care to name – substance, life, spirit – are fruitless and can only result in defining it as absolute and thus limited. The Universal Symbiosis is impalpable. Anything of

which we can gain knowledge is not the Universal Symbiosis. Like an immense coat of chain mail it closes itself around us to form a coherent world. It encloses us like a horizon. All horizons shut us in, but no horizon can ever be reached because it moves on whenever we do and always remains ahead of us, a new frontier. Never, not ever..." And now it's he who is waving his left forefinger like a windscreen wiper. "...can we reach a point where we can look at the Universal Symbiosis as an enclosed entirety..." His eyes open again – he can no longer hear the imam. He isn't there, the imam isn't there! Where has he got to? He quickly turns around. He sees the imam getting onto his bicycle.

"I have to go to the mosque for midday prayers," the imam explains by way of apology, while he gathers all the strength in his muscles to get him away from there as fast as possible.

"But you still haven't told me anything about Shaytaan!" Hamid protests.

"I have to go!" the imam shouts hastily, cycling away, not looking back. "If you come along to the mosque, then I can tell you everything."

"No," he calls after him, "I, er... I have an important appointment with, er... someone...!"

While he watches him leave, Hamid vividly imagines a bad-tempered dog pulling the imam off his bicycle. He has to laugh at this image. Isn't it amazing that you can make your own sketches, even entire movies in fact, in your head? No, actually it isn't at all. Reason is a detestable thing. If reason didn't exist you wouldn't have to remember anything. A long-term memory of no more than two seconds, such as goldfish have, would be fine. That's all that's necessary.

Only now the imam has disappeared from view does Hamid realise how much he'd like a nice spicy pig sandwich. And as he walks to the Indonesian shop, he starts to think that it can't be easy to cram the whole world into a mind corroded by fear, to imprison your soul, chain it down with narrow, superficial interpretations of the 'Holy Scriptures'. Isn't Shaytaan himself sealed up inside humanity – imprisoned, chained down by the heaviest chains of goodness, by God? Aren't simple people like the imam only able to keep Shaytaan chained up like that thanks to their faith? Well, that is the question... Sometimes Shaytaan keeps so quiet that people get curious and go and take a look to see if he's still alive. *Ha!* He has to laugh again, out loud now, because a story about an imam in Morocco has thrust itself into his consciousness, an imam who managed to run off with everyone's wife – even the wandering sheep of the *fellah* there in the mountains, yes, even the lame she-donkey that belonged to the widow in the valley found themselves on the receiving end. *Ha! Ha-ha!* It's precisely those whose faith is the strongest, the greatest of holy men, the ones who think they have already won the battle against evil, who are drawn to the silence in their souls...

\*\*\*\*\*